

Tape #84
Interview with Arthur Kowalski
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Checked by

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(00:00)
<<Gordon Jones-Portraits>>

(04:41)
<<Arthur Kowalski begins mid-interview>>

AK: I already figured that another destroyer would be staring me in the face, or I'd be staring it in the face. I said I had enough tin cans and I don't want to go back out there so I decided I'd terminate and leave out. And I got my twenty years in.

CD: Very good.

AK: But, uh, the aviation would have liked me to have come back **(05:00)** and go to school for catapult duty. I said, "No way am I going to watch those cables flying around that flight deck."

CD: That's dangerous stuff.

AK: It is. Because a friend of mine said he had, uh, He was Leading Chief aboard the carrier and he said, "There's a lot of casualties on there." Sometimes he, they took the stick to help one of the cables in it's right place, and all of a sudden someone in the power room would put the switch on that thing just whipped. But, uh, I, I can't complain. When I, uh, was a recruit trainer at the Naval Training Center from 1948 to 51 I trained the recruits at that time and I came back and trained them from fifty-six to fifty-nine. And I had good companies, got good awards, but never got promoted to be a captain. [Laughs] I was good in the field training, and training recruits the way they were supposed to be, but I've never had enough [inaudible] points **(6:00)** from the officers in charge of our group to recommend me for anything higher.

CD: Sorry to hear that.

AK: And I said, "There's something wrong." The points are there, the score is there, they probably can't pronounce the name.

<<Laughing>>

(06:18)
<<Spells out Name>>

<<Tweaks Lights>>

(07:24)

CD: If you could just introduce yourself and tell us where you come from originally, that'd be great.

AK: Well, my name is Arthur Augustine Kolawski, I originally came from Hamtramck, Michigan, and went to school at *Kosciuszko*. I also went through Hamtramck High. I decided, I've got to do something with my life other than start study for something I don't want to be, and that was aviation. And I decided to check on the Navy. But prior to that I was, for two years, in the Marine Core Reserve and the officers down there treated me well because the reserve officers **(08:00)** wanted more and more recruits to join the Marine Core. At that time I did want to be with the Marine Core, but their quota of sending different marines from the reserve units to outlying areas for regular training was very tight and very costly for each reserve group. So I didn't have the kind of influence on the officer that I wanted to stay in the Marine Core anymore. I asked for a transfer, and they asked me, "Where you going?" I told them I was going to join the U.S. Navy. "What you going to the Navy for?!?" We're Marines here, always proud, Semper Fi, what happened? I said, "Sir, they give you twenty-one dollars a month, I only get seventy dollars, uh, [fumbles] a drill period. I mean seventy cents a drill period. He said, "I can see your point." So he recommended that I get my discharge papers from the Marine Core and I join the Navy, which I did. And I joined in 1939, and the Navy acknowledged the acceptance of recruit **(09:00)** in, let's see, March, March the 6th of 1940. I got my papers to report for Marine, uh, for Navy. And the Navy accepted me, we went through training at Great Lakes, Illinois. I weighed 120 pounds. When the night officer in charge of recruitment at that time, accepting new drafts coming in, he said, "Ski, get that damn hammock on your back, take the mattress and the pillow, wrap it around, and let's go to the barracks." I said, "Sir, that's heavy." [Laughs] I said, "Boy, I'm only 120 pounds. That must be about 90 pounds of stuff." So I got it to the barracks and, of course, I expected bunks and framework and all that. He said, "You're hooking up with a hammock, and I'll show you how to hook up the hammock." And you look about six foot off the ground, and the hooks are there, and they tell you you put one hook there on the hammock, and you put your sling over here, and now you put your mattress in there, **(10:00)** and tie off eight loops on it. Know how to tie it off for, eh, for replacing it in the morning, for cleaning barracks. I tried all that, and the first time I found out my knot slipped on the hammock. Of course I slid forward, and landed on deck. He said, "You'll learn better by putting the next one up on it, you'll be safe." So for almost nine weeks of boot camp training in Naval Training Center: Great Lakes, ice, snow, weather. Nothing but frosty deal. I said, "There must be someplace else you can get a better job." [Laughs] So my tour of nine weeks was good. I graduated. Since I had two years of Marine Core they gave me my next promotion of Seaman First. That gave me a chance to become a petty officer in recruit training, and my orders were to be a leader of a Second Platoon. We did good in training and graduated, **(11:00)** not on top honors, but we got promoted to get a relieve Great Lakes and report to ship duty. My next assignment was to the

battleship, and the battleship was located over in Honolulu. So I went, "Where the hell is Honolulu at?" "Pearl Harbor Sir." He said, "The draft is going there to meet the fleet, they're coming back into Highland Rose and each group of people from this dispatch [next words inaudible] will be assigned to different battleships. I happened to be lucky to get the U.S.S. Pennsylvania BB38. Which is the flagship of the whole fleet. So to get there we had to report to Vallejo, California. That means four days and four nights on smokey train from Michigan to Vallejo, California. So our draft was reporting and we'd figure there'd be some wonderful boats or craft to take us from one ship to another. It happened to be the U.S.S. Boise **(12:00)** was scheduled to pick up the draft which was over 200 recruits. And to travel across that little bay of water in Vallejo, they had a large cargo barge. It looked like it carried everything but human beings. So our hammocks and bodies all mustered on a, oh, the deck of the cargo carrier. We came alongside the Boise, and aboard the Boise they already had our draft numbers and assignment. I figured I could be something aboard this ship, but the crew told us we just need you..." Oh brand new recruits, are you going to chip paint for us and paint the ship for us." I said, "Chip paint, paint ship? What are we..." [Laughs] So finally I found somebody who tells me, "Why don't you join the galley gang? And the galley cooks will help you out and get you out of deck force. And I did good. Had plenty to eat, plenty to show, had a lot of leisure time as long as I helped the cooks with their duties. So after about **(13:00)** oh, I think about eleven days out to sea to get to Hon... Lahaina. And I had a nice time, nice duty, the cooks and all the bakers down there wanted me to have my orders changed from the Pennsylvania over to the Boise because they could use me. I said, "I have no control over that, my orders are in the front office." So after reporting, after reporting the Battleship U.S.S. Pennsylvania that becomes another story.

(13:32)

CD: When you got to Hawaii could you tell me what it was like, what you saw? What, what, what, what, what, what Oahu looked like and was like then?

AK: Being, being from Michigan I've never seen the sea, I've never seen larger bodies of water than Belle Isle, or Michigan, uh, Lake, [inaudible] near Canada. When we came out to the ocean that was a vast area of, oh, boats Galore. But most intriguing part of it was that **(14:00)** the aroma of pineapple and pineapple grove in the islands was tremendously... Just almost any place you could inhale. So we got to know Lehienua and had a chance to go to shore. Coconuts, avocados, pineapple. We got back aboard ship, we had a lot of tastes of that. Being in the Navy aboard the battleship you're on almost curtailed rations that for chow was eight people to a table, and your head petty officer was in charge of getting the best food from the plate. At the time it got to your end of it you either got the chicken wing or the chicken back. What happened to the chicken leg? [Laughs] Yeah, I couldn't see that. So being a mess cook also was my next assignment. And I knew the cooks in galley and all that so I was able to get seconds for the table people and they appreciated that. **(15:00)** And being in Lehienua we'd begin to study our.. from A-N the fundamentals of being a sailor aboard ship. They'd ask you the nomenclature of the ship the doit, the build, the

cargo it carries, what's the depth line and we learned the seamanship very fast because we were given a test every week, seven questions. We all did pretty good, and our next job was to study to become boat handlers. Whale boat, motor launch, something like that.

<<Interruption>>

(15:44)

CD: So what was your job, what was your title and rank and job aboard the Pennsylvania?

AK: Aboard the Pennsylvania my, my first job was Third Class Petty Officer, would be as a coxswain.

<<Interruption>>

CD: Describe, so what was your rank and job and title on the Pennsylvania?

AK: On the Pennsylvania you started becoming an apprentice seaman, uh, first class or second class, it depends-your rating- and you study underneath a petty officer. And being enlisted men we don't have a rank we have a position of Petty Officer Third Class, which would be a Coxswain. So that would be handling deck crews, and if you're not handling a deck crew or assignment with working parties you'd normally run a motor launch or a whale boat. My job at Third Class at that time was assigned to number one Motor Launch, would be to handle cargo from ship to ship, **(17:00)** or lib, liberty party going, using the motor launch to get 'em from the ship to the shore base. And being a third class was, at least good two or three months duty with the whale boat or motor launch. My next assignment was second class petty officer. That means I would be handling working parties aboard ship and routine maintenance of the ship: painting, chipping, handling cargo, uh, everything that needs to keep the ship afloat and in good order. After you become a second class, and you still study, your next examination would be a petty officer of first class. Still in the deck force and the title is Boat-mate First Class. That means you are in charge of a division, a crew, and you are able to assign jobs and maintain the ship in customary fashion. Uh, always ready to paint and preserve the ship to its order.

(18:00)

CD: Now, what was...What was your day like-a typical day aboard the Pennsylvania before the attacks? Before, what was a typical day for you like?

AK: Our typical day aboard ship was the same thing: routine maintenance. That means if there was a rust spot you maintain and preserved it and keep the paint from anymore wear and tear on having any more water exposed to the rust. Preserving the gutters, or making new lines, pending for your life lines, or having the lines ready for having stores brought aboard ship. Uh, if a tackle or a hook needs to be placed, and then generally teaching other people the deck force seamanship of handling lines, chipping paint, preserving the ship in first class

order. 'Cause every Friday there was an inspection aboard ship and certain parts of the ship would be perfect or else you be in trouble. **(19:00)** Because maintenance is a high recognition for the Captain.

(19:06)

CD: Could you talk a little bit about the, um... what the Pennsylvania meant to you being on board her?

AK: In, uh, what respect?

CD: Wh... the, the... being a crew of the Pennsylvania and taking care of your ship and having your men work on her, what...like... I'm talking about the pride. What was that? Like can you.

(19:27)

AK: To, to me it was great pride because it was something I've never had before. I learned fast from the petty officers because you're either going to be advanced to a higher position and rank, or leaving the ship and leaving a vacant seat for me to step in. I enjoyed it, I recognized th, that studying and passing the tests made [inaudible] with the officers. They knew that you were really, really trying hard to be in the next rank.

(19:56)

CD: Was there a camaraderie among the crew on the ship?

AK: Always, there's always uh, a part that the petty officer will find a certain group of people that would like to studying with you, from you, and be you in the future.

(20:11)

CD: What was your shore leave like?

AK: My shore leave, most of the time, was recruit training. I enjoyed the recruit training, I'd get usually 80 to 120 men in a company and from step one to step, uh, graduation they knew and they took pride because I noticed the part of it when they graduate in training from Great Lakes or Naval Training Center San Diego, their parents would always drop a note or hint to you "You made my boy proud to be a Navy." I couldn't, I couldn't say anything else except that the boys would say that "he's a good chief, sometimes he's a bastard."

CD: I guess that comes with the job doesn't it?

AK: That's it.

(20:55)

CD: Um, so when you where on Oahu and you would go off the ship on leave, what would you do?

AK: We [clears throat] most of the time I was able to get five or ten dollars, I'd rent a car on a weekend and the gasoline was already payed for, and travel the islands, I'd get pictures from of Mt., uh, name the mountains around there. And I'd return the cars back in good condition I had a good recommendation of being able to get without a deposit for a car rental. The other parts was the museums that we took in places, and, uh, well we had beer parties or whisky parties. We had beer parties galore on Naval, uh, at the Naval Base and at that time beer was ten cents a can. And so most of us would sit there and drink beer. Uh, most of your refreshments off the island would be mostly rum-coke or heavy, heavy duty drink. **(22:00)** And uh, the liberty was over, over extended. During the wartime liberty was terminated at midnight. Uh, other than that there was not much recreation to do.

(22:18)

CD: What was your, um, did you have any idea that Japan and the United States were, were having diplomatic troubles?

AK I don't think [clears throat] the deck force I don't think we even agreed to find out what was happening in generality, uh, by listening to the radio or news. We had no idea what conflict was brewing for us to attack, otherwise we would have been prepared. It, it, it's something that...it brings me back to why I could not have a camera aboard the battleship. Because it was supposed to be a secret of whatever you took pictures of. And I have to laugh at it because the other sailors on battleships, other sailors on carries were able to carry their cameras with them on liberty. Or off liberty, of the, off the ship and they had pictures. I had so much restriction on my little camera, that they kept a lock and key. [Laughs]

(23:17)

CD Do you remember what you did December the 6th?

AK: December 6th I [clears throat] we did, we did have a working party working. And those that were able to go on liberty would go to the, uh, the battle of the bands over at the sports arena. And, it was free, it was, uh, all, all the ship handlers would go out there and enjoy their company. And put a hoorah for their ship. It just so happens the Pennsylvania and other ships were in close tie. Happens that to be uncomfortable mentioning it that the Pennsylvania took the trophy, but upon after the war surrendered the trophy to the ship that had more, more pride and musicians that were lost because the skipper of the ship authorized his crew to sleep in. And they would have won had they been in the battle for the bands, uh, legally. But so happened that the Pennsylvania won more points and got the trophy, but the crew and the band relinquished their idea that they perished for our music.

(24:30)

CD: Could you walk me through your day on December 7, 1941? What you saw, what you did?

AK: Early morning [clears throat] early morning most of the boat crew will have their revelry at five o'clock or early in the morning so they can get their bilges pumped, uh, water out of the boat, uh, shine brass work, polish up the decks, clean everything ship shape because the duty officer would make his rounds of the... notifying that the ships are ready for any days duty. So while we had the boats all fixed and ready to go for any... (25:00) In fact it was a Sunday morning my assignment would be to take the crew of various ships that we came alongside, to take 'em to church party. The church party would be at seven o'clock in the morning, and we'd have to be there delivering whatever sailors wanted to go. As we prepared to get the boats ready for taking liberty parties or boat parties to go to church, we looked up over the sky. There was planes flying around and I didn't know what the devil the red ball had meant on the ship. I figured it was just another stunt act. But somebody said, "Oh, looks like the Japs are getting us." Sure enough there was ricochet coming up from the battle, from the bullets coming down over the bulkheads, and bouncing off the steel work. And next thing we know we hear the word, "All hands man your battle stations. Boat crew report to the duty officer." So upon reporting to the duty officer he told us, "Your not in any way can you fire your guns or your battle station because your heavy ammunition would endanger the people of the populace of Oahu, or the islands around there." So we were restricted. The only thing we could fire down there was the twenty millimeter and machine guns. My duty from the duty officer was to report to the U.S.S. Dobbin and get the orders from them. The duty officer on the U.S.S. Dobbin requested that we use our motor launch to go to West Lock. West Lock is an ammunition depo reserved to replenish and repair or assign boats and ammunition to various ships. Our duty was to pick up some warheads and torpedoes and forty millimeter or twenty millimeter ammunition box, to report back to the Dobbin so the Dobbin can reissue the ammunition to the various ships she's assigned with. Coming back to the motor launch, and getting all this ammunition and stuff on there I kept (27:00) telling the officer of the ramp on the West Lock, "Sir I don't have a gun to fire back. You have any I..." He said, "Go back to your ship, see if you can get the gunners mate to give you a rifle." A rifle's the 1903 or 19 model single deal. You get eight bullets in there and that's it. So I went back to the ship and told the OD what happened and he said, "Go check with the gunner's mate and see if he can give you some type of defense." We are open target, our motor launch is up in the open water, and those Japanese flyers are shooting machine guns at anything they could get that moves in the water. Lucky that nobody hit us and we're in safe haven. But after that I found out that most the crews from different ships that were trying to aid and assist the sailors were being soaked in the water with gasoline and fuel oil. They were being hit by ricochet. And put me two and two together and I tried to stay on the least side, but there is no least side. Them planes are flying (28:00) from every angle. So that was our morning watch and for the rest of the day we applied our efforts and our boats to various ships to assign and help them.

(28:11)

CD: How did, how did you, how did you help the, um, the recovery effort or the...did... was your motor launch were you, where you in the water helping pull

any of the survivors out or...

AK: We only [clears throat] at the motor launch there we were close to the, to the, uh, hospital landing. We were able to pick up two using the bow hook. The men were completely gone, there was no life left in them so we took the bow hook and hooked them on to their clothing, and dragged them up to the ramp where the core men would take them off of our hands. Other than that I had no time to be risking anybody in the water. My job was to keep ammunitions coming back to the ships.

(28:54)

CD: Did you see the Arizona get hit? The explosion?

AK: Not really, I seen only the smoke and flames and fire. And I knew there was a lot of trouble in that ship there 'cause there were extensive blowing up of ammunition in the magazines.

(29:07)

CD: Did you see the Arizona go over? Oh, excuse me, the Oklahoma.

AK: No the Oklahoma was a distance away from our runway, or the motor launch way, 'cause that was completely, if we were... would be skylarking...the exactly... they, they don't want you to go looking at different ships or fire. Your job was to provide ammunition for the ships that request.

(29:31)

CD: What's your most vivid memory of that day?

AK: The vivid memory of that day was the formation of body being fueled by the oil in the water and mixed together, and being on flame in their clothing. And that was a sickening thought. There was somebody of your nature, a sailor, being soaked in the water in oil, and the fire and the flame had no picking, it just took them all. So the bodies and, not just the fuel from the ships that came afloat. There were bodies galore out there being almost burnt to death.

END OF TAPE